

Sunday

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# Los Angeles Times

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ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

**HOMEOWNER** Valerie Elachi searches for valuables amid the rubble of her home in Altadena after it was destroyed by the Eaton fire.

## Did lack of cityhood hurt Altadena?

In the first 24 hours of the Eaton fire, Pasadena's communications director helped activate four different kinds of alerts to keep its residents apprised of evacuation orders, while also hopping on several news programs and doing interviews to share updates in real time.

Some wonder if unincorporated status had a role in slow evacuation alerts that led to 'catastrophic failure'

By Grace Toohey

Further east, when Arcadia joined the sphere of concern as the fire erratically tore through the San Gabriel foothills, the city's fire chief successfully advocated for unified commanders to issue more widespread evacuations than initially proposed.

[See Altadena, A10]

## Monumental fire debris cleanup could finish in June

By James Rainey

A small army of laborers, heavy-equipment operators, hazmat technicians and truck drivers have cleared more than a third of the home lots left in charred ruin by January's firestorms — a frenetic

pace that suggests the bulk of the vast government-run cleanup in Los Angeles County could be completed as early as June, officials say.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officers overseeing the effort said the crews of mostly private contractors are working at a record clip for a wildfire recovery, clearing nearly 120

lots a day and operating at close to the capacity that roads — and residents close to the fire zones — can tolerate.

The scope of the unfinished work came into clearer focus last week, with the passing of the April 15 deadline for residents of Altadena, Pacific Palisades and Malibu to opt

in or out of the cleanup.

Some 10,373 property owners completed "right-of-entry" forms authorizing the Army Corps and government contractors to work on their properties, while 1,698 others opted out of the program, many because they wanted their own crews

[See Debris, A11]

## Jewelry owners catch gold fever as price of metal soars

Many are looking to melt their baubles for cash

By Andrea Chang

With gold prices at record highs, jewelry collectors are in meltdown mode.

For weeks, they've been scouring their homes and cracking open their safes to retrieve vintage necklaces, family heirlooms and other

expensive pieces containing the precious metal that can be melted for cash.

"It happens with every gold spike," said Jeff Clark, a market analyst and founder of TheGoldAdvisor.com. "If you've got a lot of old gold jewelry, it's basically free money."

The price of gold hit an

all-time high of \$3,357 per ounce on Thursday and is up about 27% from the beginning of the year, driven by factors including geopolitical tensions, tariff turmoil and increased demand from central banks.

Gold has long been considered a safe-haven asset

[See Gold, A9]



JULIANA YAMADA Los Angeles Times

**JEWELER** Olivia Kazanjian recently persuaded a client to save items with irreplaceable craftsmanship.

## SUPREME COURT HALTS DETAINEE REMOVAL

The temporary order comes after lawyers argue the Venezuelan men were at risk of imminent deportation.

By Rachel Uranga, Andrea Castillo and David G. Savage

The U.S. Supreme Court temporarily blocked the removal of Venezuelan detainees accused under a wartime law of being foreign gang members early Saturday morning, after the ACLU argued the men were at risk of imminent removal to a Salvadoran prison.

"The Government is directed not to remove any member of the putative class of detainees from the United States until further order of this Court," the court stated in an unsigned order.

Justices Clarence Thomas and Samuel A. Alito Jr. dissented.

The court's after-midnight intervention heightens its clash with the Trump administration over deportations. It suggests most of the justices are not willing to trust Trump officials to follow its earlier order giving detainees a right to a hearing before they can be deported.

The ACLU had asked multiple courts on Friday to temporarily halt the detainees' removal — arguing in one filing that the Trump administration was busying many of them presumably to an airport to be deported.

In a Friday hearing, Drew C. Ensign, a lawyer for the U.S. Department of Justice, told U.S. District Judge James E. Boasberg in Washington, D.C., that there were no current plans to deport individuals Friday or Saturday by plane presumably to El Salvador, but the Trump administration reserved the right to remove people Saturday.

The ACLU asked the courts for an emergency order after Venezuelan detainees from across the country, including California, were transferred to the Bluebonnet Detention Facility in Anson, Texas, and, according to their filings, told they would be removed as soon as Friday night.

The Trump administration flew hundreds of Venezuelan immigrants deemed members of the gang Tren de Aragua last month to El Salvador, where they are being held in a notorious mega-

[See Court, A8]

State workers cash in on unused

Ukraine skeptical of Easter ceasefire



# Did unincorporated status hurt Altadena?

[Altadena, from A1]

Then, when a shift in winds sent the fire on a terrifying march west, La Cañada Flintridge officials stood ready to quickly alert and evacuate all residents, having activated its emergency operations center immediately after the fire broke out almost 12 hours earlier — even though the small city was initially miles from the blaze.

Meanwhile, many residents in Altadena — which would end up seeing the worst damage from the conflagration — felt left in the dark, seemingly lost in the chaos. Thousands found themselves waiting and waiting for alerts and evacuation updates, even as their neighborhoods came under siege.

It's a major point of frustration and anger in Altadena that has reignited concerns about how the unincorporated town is governed, how resources are allocated and how key communications are issued — especially compared with the many independent cities that surround it.

The fire “brought to the forefront the issues of us being unincorporated; in some ways it did put us at a disadvantage,” said Darlene Greene, a member of Altadena's town council, which can pass along concerns or recommendations to Los Angeles County leaders but holds no real governing power or spending authority.

“Incorporated cities, in my opinion, just have more resources. ... I certainly think that hurt us,” Greene said. Other cities “have coordinated efforts for emergencies. For us, we do have it [through the county], but anytime there's a middle person, there's gaps. ... It's not top of mind.”

It's unlikely that Altadena could have fared better — even with its own city government — against the major ember-cast fire driven by hurricane-force winds, which fire officials say was impossible to fight at times, much less predict. But some local officials and residents wonder if dedicated resources and leadership could have improved the emergency response, especially with regard to evacuation alerts.

Reporting by The Times revealed that west Altadena did not get official evacuation alerts until hours after flames threatened the area, an issue that is now the subject of multiple investigations and reviews. It was in those neighborhoods west of Lake Avenue where 17 of the Eaton fire's 18 deaths occurred.

“It's catastrophic failure,” said Serina Covarrubias, a west Altadena resident who has been advocating for better public resources and government representation for the town since even before the fire. “It just tells me that there was no centralized communication, no one was calling the shots and it was a hot mess.”

County officials, who were coordinating the evacuation decisions and alerts the night of the fire, still haven't provided any answers or explanation about what went wrong and how they failed to systematically evacuate a large section of the community.

Los Angeles County Supervisor Kathryn Barger, who serves as the de facto mayor for Altadena, was quick to criticize what she called the evacuation “epic fail” in west Altadena, but Barger said this specific shortcoming doesn't neces-



RUBBLE and debris are strewn throughout the Terraces at Park Marino assisted living facility in Altadena in the Eaton fire's aftermath.



SERIINA COVARRUBIAS, shown at her temporary residence in Orange County, decided to evacuate with her husband and roommate before receiving any alert.

jurisdiction — it appears that residents in surrounding cities had more avenues to receive communication, more focused leadership and more resources dedicated to their communities.

In the early hours of the Eaton fire, from about 1 a.m. to 3 a.m. Jan. 8, there was a significant time gap when no formal evacuation alerts went out. But once the late warning was issued for west Altadena around 3:30 a.m. — well after flames were in the area — alerts for sections of several cities nearby followed, first La Cañada Flintridge, then Monrovia and Glendale. Those cities — which ended up with no damage from the fires — initiated their evacuations before the final late alert was issued for west Altadena at 5:42 a.m., according to records of archived alerts.

As the fire continued west and overwhelmed crews in west Altadena, Pasadena was able to dispatch its police officers to evacuate and escort residents out of the Linda Vista area, neighborhoods just across from west Altadena. In La Cañada Flintridge, officials sent out geographic-coded phone alerts from their emergency operations center, in addition to ones sent by the county. Even NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab, which has its own fire department, had its own emergency management team staffed 24/7 during the fire,

have local representatives. ... They're beating the drum about what's happening in the community.”

Though L.A. County does have extensive resources far above that of any small city, there's no avoiding the fact that Altadena is one small community in the most populous county in the country, Sonenshein said.

“It's kind of easy for the unincorporated territory to fall through the cracks,” Sonenshein said. “This is a case where government structure has impacts.”

And while there may be a renewed interest in getting Altadena better representation, proponents are clear that is far from the priority right now. Community leaders and members are entirely focused on recovery from the devastating fire, which destroyed more than 9,000 buildings, the vast majority in Altadena. When one Pasadena leader in January brought up the idea of annexation — absorbing Altadena into Pasadena — it stirred contempt, both for its timing and the idea itself, which has been shot down repeatedly by Altadena's fiercely independent-minded residents.

Sonenshein also pointed to the recent passage of Measure G, which over the next eight years will expand and potentially transform the county's government by adding four new supervisors and a county executive. He said that could change how

we were fighting against.”

She said she got involved with the movement after it took two years of organizing and hard work to get two speed bumps installed on her street — something she considered a no-brainer safety issue. She thinks the best solution is for Altadena to become its own city.

It's exceptionally frustrating that no leader or agency has owned up to the evacuation failure — or provided an explanation — even now, more than three months after the fire, Covarrubias said.

“It makes you feel ... like the county just takes the money from the homeowners' taxes and runs,” Covarrubias said. “There's not any leadership that has accountability right now.”

But cityhood may not be the only solution. In unincorporated Topanga, residents have formed the Topanga Coalition for Emergency Preparedness, a volunteer group that provides real-time emergency updates and disaster information for the Santa Monica Mountains communities and also coordinates preparation efforts focused on wildfire resilience.

“We do not believe the systems in place are good enough,” said James Grasso, the group's president. “Even with my foot in the door, it's very difficult to get communications.”

Grasso said the group

clearly, we need it.”

While their group has a great relationship with Supervisor Lindsey Horvath, Grasso said, there are still gaps in what the community needs that the county has yet to fill.

Many people The Times interviewed in favor of more locally focused emergency operations for Altadena were clear that the on-the-ground firefighting — which operated as a mutual aid system during the Eaton fire — was not a driving factor in their position. Issues related to emergency planning, messaging and communications were the main concerns, which all fall under the purview of city officials.

“We're all good partners, ... but our focus is our own jurisdiction,” said Arcadia Fire Chief Chen Suen. He recalled that when the Eaton fire's unified command recommended that parts of northern Arcadia be evacuated or issued warnings, he reviewed the situation with other city officials and decided to evacuate a larger area than initially considered.

“It's so much better to get people out during an event for safety reasons, than to — at the eleventh hour — try to get people out,” Suen said in an interview with The Times.

The string of Arcadia's evacuation alerts went out on the county-run Wireless Emergency Alert system, or WEA, which targets cellphones in a certain geographical area, but Arcadia officials also initiated their own protocols: posting on social media, using the city's opt-in alert system and activating its Police Department to go door-to-door, Suen said. The city had also warned residents in the first few hours of the fire that evacuations could soon become necessary.

West Altadena never received any evacuation warnings.

In Pasadena, officials also focused on the idea of redundancy: making sure there were several ways to reach residents with critical updates. The city uses its PLEAS alert system, a type of alert that will text or call residents who have signed up; a program called Nixle, which sends opt-in email or text information; and also appearances on local news and posts on its website and

and timely evacuation alerts during the L.A. firestorm, according to a statement from the county's Coordinated Joint Information Center.

The CJIC provides public information during large-scale disasters through the county's Office of Emergency Management.

County officials, however, also recommend people sign up for their more-local emergency notification systems, most operated by cities.

Sheriff's deputies also worked to carry out evacuation orders on the ground, though many in west Altadena said they saw few to no first responders that night.

The CJIC declined to answer specific questions related to the Eaton fire until the after-action report is completed. But it did say it follows all state emergency management requirements and has eight different disaster management coordinators assigned to different regions to better tailor its response. In a statement, it called its emergency response a “collective effort more than that of any single organization, department, or jurisdiction.”

It is important to note, however, that the community of Kinneloa Mesa — just east of Altadena — is similarly unincorporated, but had no reported issues with its evacuation alerts. The foothill community sits not far from where the Eaton fire broke out, and its evacuations were swift, with several of the first fire crews arriving there.

And for some, the evacuation-alert issue in west Altadena is just that: one glaring issue, not a reason to go through the complicated and often expensive process of incorporation or deal with more red tape or regulation.

“Obviously something went wrong,” said Connor Cipolla, another member of the Altadena Town Council. And while he emphasized that he wants answers and fixes so it doesn't happen again, he said he's not convinced Altadena would get better services as a city, and pointed to California's strong mutual aid system during fires.

“Altadenans love their autonomy,” said Cipolla, who remembers living in Pasadena and constantly getting parking tickets. “The quirkiness and the self-

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# na? Army Corps removes 100 Eiffel towers of fire debris

[Debris, from A1] to perform the work.

Army Corps commanders reported that 4,153 properties across the Eaton and Palisades burn zones had been cleared by Thursday, though the total declared as "complete" is lower because many of the lots still need finishing touches — including the removal of hazardous trees, installation of fencing around pools and application of "hydro-mulch" sealant to prevent erosion.

Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass held a news conference Thursday to mark 100 days since the fires and to tout the speed of the recovery.

"The Army Corps of Engineers are heroes in Los Angeles, are heroes in the Palisades," said Bass, standing alongside Army commanders and Westside Councilmember Traci Park. "It is amazing to come here day after day. ... Every time I come, I see more and more properties cleared."

The Army officers commanding the cleanup say it is the biggest their agency has ever conducted in a wildfire zone. With more than a million tons of concrete, steel, earth and plants already removed from the burn areas, two colonels overseeing the operation reached for superlatives to describe the scope of the work.

The weight of the debris removed equals that of 100 Eiffel towers, said Col. Sonny Avichal, the West Point graduate overseeing the Altadena fire cleanup. The weight taken out of the Palisades alone is equal to a row of Ford F-150 pickups lined up end-to-end and stretching from Los Angeles past Salt Lake City, said Col. Brian Sawser, another West Point grad, who has overseen the Palisades fire cleanup.

"This has been very similar to a war-fighting approach," said Sawser, referring to the military's strategy of bringing together diverse personnel, organizations and processes and unifying them in a common purpose. He later pledged: "Renewal is coming, it's coming. And we're bringing it to you as fast as we possibly can."

Avichal said the mission requires brute force but also a soft touch, as when an elderly woman in Altadena recently asked a cleanup crew for a personal treasure

buried in her home's rubble. The workers soon recovered a small safe and the gold coins inside it, delivering the bounty to the beaming homeowner, a moment captured in a Facebook video.

"At the end of the day, it's about the human touch," Avichal said, recognizing the workers who returned the coins to the owner. "It's about the compassion we have for the individuals who lost their homes."

The cleanup has ramped up considerably in recent weeks.

When Avichal arrived in February from his base in Virginia, there were only 20 crews clearing lots in Altadena. (Each crew consists of, at minimum, a quality assurance official from the Army Corps; a task force leader from the principal contractor, Burlingame-based ECC; a heavy-equipment operator; a crew leader; and several laborers.) Now 129 crews are clearing properties in the San Gabriel Valley community.

It takes a little less than two days for workers to finish clearing a property, slightly less than the time needed in the Palisades, where lots tend to be larger, and in Malibu, where some of the work has been complicated because of the precarious perch of more than 300 burned homes along the beach.

The fire zones now teem with lines of trucks, earthmovers and workers in yellow and orange safety vests. The air thrums with the din of destruction — giant excavators clanking against steel beams, trucks bleating out warning signals as they back into position, green organic material whooshing out of hoses onto finished sites.

While the images can appear chaotic, they are the result of hours of planning and preparation.

Homeowners typically receive a call two or three days before crews arrive. A staffer from lead contractor ECC asks for important property details: Are there septic tank lids or propane tanks that need to be avoided? Are there pet graves that must be left undisturbed? Do workers need to be on the lookout for squatters?

An initial inspection crew commissioned by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency then screens each property in search of paints and other toxic substances. Analysts also probe for as-



MYUNG J. CHUN Los Angeles Times

**TEMESCAL CANYON** is being used to break down and recycle debris from the Palisades fire. Anthony Marguleas, a real estate agent involved in rebuilding efforts, calls the initiative "a clear win for the community."

bestos — a job that expanded as the carcinogenic material turned up in many more locations than expected.

Workers have found asbestos in more than 60% of homes in Altadena and more than 40% in the extended Palisades fire zone. Cleanup crews in white hazmat suits and respirators typically needed up to three days to scrape away the material and remove it in sealed containers.

"At one point we had 95 crews doing nothing but asbestos abatement," Avichal said.

On the Westside, the debris removal has been complicated by the constricted roads in and out of the burn zone. Traffic flow along Pacific Coast Highway has been reduced to one lane in each direction, and Temescal Canyon Road remains closed to create what the Army leaders call a TDRS — Temporary Debris Reduction Site.

Heavy excavation machines bash giant concrete blocks into more manageable chunks, before grinders pulverize the material into 1- to 3-inch rocks that can be recycled. Steel and other metals also get compacted in the recycling zone before being trucked away.

By doing the reduction work close to the disaster site, debris that initially filled three or four dump trucks can be consolidated into one large tractor-trailer load. That means that the total truck traffic leaving the burn areas is reduced substantially.

Anthony Marguleas, a real estate agent active in rebuilding efforts in the Palisades, called the debris recycling effort "a clear win for the community," in that it reduced outbound truck traf-

fic and also appeared to be "efficient and environmentally responsible."

State Insurance Commissioner Ricardo Lara said in January that homeowners have typically spent more than \$100,000 when they paid to have private contractors remove debris after recent wildfires.

Those who opt in to the government program have no direct out-of-pocket costs, though the Army Corps will ask insurance companies that cover debris removal to reimburse the government up to the limits of that specific coverage.

The pressure for progress abounds throughout the fire communities, as homeowners plead for access that will allow them to start rebuilding. But the drive to complete the work is particularly high along PCH in Malibu, where 327 homes burned.

The extra anxiety has multiple causes: The charred remains of homes continue to wash away, spilling contaminants into Santa Monica Bay. Caltrans crews need access to ensure the ground under PCH does not erode. And the sooner the work is done, the sooner access might improve along the highway, a lifeline for residents and for businesses that depend on customers coming from Santa Monica and points beyond.

Sawser said last week that the Army Corps-led crews would be "tripling their effort" along the coast, with as many as a dozen crews clearing home sites, compared to the three or four that had operated there before.

"That highway is the linchpin to everything that we do," Sawser said, "because we not only have to

clear that debris for many reasons, we also need to have the highway to move material out of a lot of other locations."

Though cleanup crews have drawn wide praise, the work has not been flawless. A homeowner complained at a recent hearing in Malibu that an excavator mistakenly began to plow up the concrete slab under her ADU. She caught the mistake before the destruction was complete and the contractor later told her by phone that the company would pay to repair the damage.

And some health officials and residents have questioned whether the lot clearances have gone far enough. The Federal Emergency Management Agency decided to not follow past practice of testing the soil after disasters for contaminants. Those tests typically had been used to determine whether cleanup crews should remove more than the first 6 inches of topsoil.

After the twin L.A. fires, FEMA announced it would not conduct the soil testing on cleared lots, drawing criticism that the cleanups would not be truly complete.

Those reservations gained some traction this month when soil testing by Los Angeles County in and around the burn areas found concerning levels of lead.

The potential adverse impact of the work has also generated pushback in neighboring Southern California communities, given the more than 2,000 truckloads of earth, concrete, metal and other debris being shipped each day to 16 landfills and recycling centers around the region.

The Simi Valley Landfill & Recycling Center has taken by far the biggest share of

the fire detritus, receiving an average of 1,228 truckloads a day last week and a total of 636,000 tons of debris since the cleanup started. The Sunshine Canyon Landfill in Sylmar, the second biggest fire debris repository, has received 126,000 tons.

From Malibu to Calabasas, Altadena and Irwindale, residents around the burn zones and the communities where the debris is being deposited have expressed fears that toxic materials could be released into the air and soil.

Contractors have responded that they are taking considerable care — including frequent watering of home lots and waste consolidation sites — to keep pollutants out of the air.

Into mid-April, the protests and a lawsuit by the city of Calabasas had not succeeded in redirecting the debris.

On a recent weekday afternoon, debris trucks lined up for several hundred yards outside the weigh station at Simi Valley Landfill & Recycling Center.

Once inside, trucks lumbered up a long, curving road into the hills. Then came another wait to dump their loads — an untold number of incinerated living room sets, teddy bears, running shoes and other detritus, spilling into a final resting place.

An enormous cloud of gulls billowed and swooped around the charred waste.

"Everything we owned and gathered over 35 years was hauled away in like three trucks," said Elitan, a Palisades man who declined to give his last name. "It's almost a biblical kind of conclusion, from ashes to ashes. That's for humans but, in this case, it's for all of those objects as well."

## Clinton returns to Oklahoma City 30 years after bombing killed 168

By SEAN MURPHY

**OKLAHOMA CITY** — Thirty years after the deadliest homegrown attack in U.S. history, former President Clinton returned to Oklahoma City on Saturday to remember the people who were killed and comfort those affected by the bombing.

Clinton was president on



was scheduled to take place on the grounds of the memorial but was moved inside an adjacent church because of heavy rains.

After the ceremony, a procession of bagpipe players from the Oklahoma City Fire Department led many of those in attendance across the street to the outdoor memorial built on the grounds where the federal building once stood. The

## Judge intervenes in Tufts student case

By HOLLY RAMER AND KATHY MCCORMACK

A Tufts University student from Turkey being held in a Louisiana immigration facility must be returned to New England no later than May 1 to determine whether she was illegally detained for co-writing an op-ed piece in the student newspaper, a federal judge ruled Friday.

U.S. District Judge William Sessions said he

fore putting her on a plane to a detention center in Basile, La. An immigration judge denied her request for bond Wednesday, citing "danger and flight risk."

Ozturk's lawyers first filed a petition on her behalf in Massachusetts, but they didn't know where she was and were unable to speak to her until more than 24 hours after she was detained. Ozturk said she unsuccessfully made multiple requests to speak to a lawyer.



siege. It's a major point of frustration and anger in Altadena that has reignited concerns about how the unincorporated town is governed, how resources are allocated and how key communications are issued — especially compared with the many independent cities that surround it.

The fire "brought to the forefront the issues of us being unincorporated; in some ways it did put us at a disadvantage," said Darlene Greene, a member of Altadena's town council, which can pass along concerns or recommendations to Los Angeles County leaders but holds no real governing power or spending authority.

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"It's catastrophic failure," said Serina Covarrubias, a west Altadena resident who has been advocating for better public resources and government representation for the town since even before the fire. "It just tells me that there was no centralized communication, no one was calling the shots and it was a hot mess."

County officials, who were coordinating the evacuation decisions and alerts the night of the fire, still haven't provided any answers or explanation about what went wrong and how they failed to systematically evacuate a large section of the community.

Los Angeles County Supervisor Kathryn Barger, who serves as the de facto mayor for Altadena, was quick to criticize what she called the evacuation "epic fail" in west Altadena, but Barger said this specific shortcoming doesn't necessarily point to a larger issue about Altadena's resources or support. She and other county officials have declined to comment further on what happened with the evacuation alerts until the completion of an outside after-action review.

"I know my unincorporated cities like the back of my hand," Barger said in an interview. "Altadena, it is a focus, but I'm not ignoring the rest of my district."

She pointed to her large, qualified staff that she said supports her and her work across her unincorporated communities, of which there are at least 63, including Altadena.

"At the end of the day ... I do stand tall with the representation this county has provided to Altadena," Barger said.

While it's hard to make direct comparisons to nearby cities — particularly because the Eaton fire hit Altadena harder than any other



ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

**RUBBLE** and debris are strewn throughout the Terraces at Park Marino assisted living facility in Altadena in the Eaton fire's aftermath.



WILLIAM LIANG For The Times

**SERINA COVARRUBIAS**, shown at her temporary residence in Orange County, decided to evacuate with her husband and roommate before receiving any alert.

jurisdiction — it appears that residents in surrounding cities had more avenues to receive communication, more focused leadership and more resources dedicated to their communities.

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As the fire continued west and overwhelmed crews in west Altadena, Pasadena was able to dispatch its police officers to evacuate and escort residents out of the Linda Vista area, neighborhoods just across from west Altadena. In La Cañada Flintridge, officials sent out geographic-coded phone alerts from their emergency operations center, in addition to ones sent by the county. Even NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab, which has its own fire department, had its own emergency management team staffed 24/7 during the fire, sending out alerts to employees when necessary.

"When you're a full-service city, you have the ability to be a little more nimble and target some additional resources where there's need," Pasadena Fire Chief Chad Augustin said. While he and other city officials operated in a unified command structure throughout the Eaton fire — with the county and other agencies — "we're still ultimately responsible for our city."

And that is one of the most useful aspects of a hyperlocal government during a crisis: It can provide a central spot for questions, information and updates, said Raphael Sonenshein, executive director of the Haynes Foundation, which supports research on governance and democracy in the L.A. region.

"They're going to be taking your case and advocating," Sonenshein said. "The real advantage of it all is you

have local representatives. ... They're beating the drum about what's happening in the community."

Though L.A. County does have extensive resources far above that of any small city, there's no avoiding the fact that Altadena is one small community in the most populous county in the country, Sonenshein said.

"It's kind of easy for the unincorporated territory to fall through the cracks," Sonenshein said. "This is a case where government structure has impacts."

And while there may be a renewed interest in getting Altadena better representation, proponents are clear that is far from the priority right now. Community leaders and members are entirely focused on recovery from the devastating fire, which destroyed more than 9,000 buildings, the vast majority in Altadena. When one Pasadena leader in January brought up the idea of annexation — absorbing Altadena into Pasadena — it stirred contempt, both for its timing and the idea itself, which has been shot down repeatedly by Altadena's fiercely independent-minded residents.

Sonenshein also pointed to the recent passage of Measure G, which over the next eight years will expand and potentially transform the county's government by adding four new supervisors and a county executive. He said that could change how Altadenans feel connected to and supported by the county government.

But for Covarrubias, this is an issue that has needed to be addressed for years and was made devastatingly clear when her neighbors were left — literally — in the dark as the fire threatened their street. She lives in the evacuation zone that got the latest order to leave, just before 6 a.m., about six hours after the fire was reported in the area.

Covarrubias, 42, along with her husband and their roommate, decided to leave on their own the evening of Jan. 7 before any evacuation alert. Many of her neighbors stayed behind, waiting to be told if they needed to leave.

"They got out just barely," said Covarrubias, who is part of California Unincorporated, a group that works to improve how unincorporated areas are governed. "It was everything

we were fighting against."

She said she got involved with the movement after it took two years of organizing and hard work to get two speed bumps installed on her street — something she considered a no-brainer safety issue. She thinks the best solution is for Altadena to become its own city.

It's exceptionally frustrating that no leader or agency has owned up to the evacuation failure — or provided an explanation — even now, more than three months after the fire, Covarrubias said.

"It makes you feel ... like the county just takes the money from the homeowners' taxes and runs," Covarrubias said. "There's not any leadership that has accountability right now."

But cityhood may not be the only solution. In unincorporated Topanga, residents have formed the Topanga Coalition for Emergency Preparedness, a volunteer group that provides real-time emergency updates and disaster information for the Santa Monica Mountains communities and also coordinates preparation efforts focused on wildfire resilience.

"We do not believe the systems in place are good enough," said James Grasso, the group's president. "Even with my foot in the door, it's very difficult to get communications."

Grasso said the group formed after the Woolsey fire in 2018, when people really struggled to find relevant and accurate information about evacuations, road closures, firefighting and other needed resources. And while the county's emergency procedures have since improved dramatically — he said there weren't official evacuation zones in 2018 — he said getting key updates can still be confusing and inconsistent, particularly for the elderly or disabled. The group's team works to compile and tailor relevant information during an emergency for its "perilous paradise" community, as it did during the Palisades fire, Grasso said.

"We have no city government, we have no town government. Our government, in effect, is our supervisor, and our supervisor has a lot of areas. ... It's a huge district," Grasso said. "We fight for everything that we have ... because we understand,

clearly, we need it."

While their group has a great relationship with Supervisor Lindsey Horvath, Grasso said, there are still gaps in what the community needs that the county has yet to fill.

Many people The Times interviewed in favor of more locally focused emergency operations for Altadena were clear that the on-the-ground firefighting — which operated as a mutual aid system during the Eaton fire — was not a driving factor in their position. Issues related to emergency planning, messaging and communications were the main concerns, which all fall under the purview of city officials.

"We're all good partners, ... but our focus is our own jurisdiction," said Arcadia Fire Chief Chen Suen. He recalled that when the Eaton fire's unified command recommended that parts of northern Arcadia be evacuated or issued warnings, he reviewed the situation with other city officials and decided to evacuate a larger area than initially considered.

"It's so much better to get people out during an event for safety reasons, than to — at the eleventh hour — try to get people out," Suen said in an interview with The Times.

The string of Arcadia's evacuation alerts went out on the county-run Wireless Emergency Alert system, or WEA, which targets cellphones in a certain geographical area, but Arcadia officials also initiated their own protocols: posting on social media, using the city's opt-in alert system and activating its Police Department to go door-to-door, Suen said. The city had also warned residents in the first few hours of the fire that evacuations could soon become necessary.

West Altadena never received any evacuation warnings.

In Pasadena, officials also focused on the idea of redundancy: making sure there were several ways to reach residents with critical updates. The city uses its PLEAS alert system, a type of alert that will text or call residents who have signed up; a program called Nixle, which sends opt-in email or text information; and also appearances on local news and posts on its website and social media. And that is in addition to the county's WEA notices and police officers on the streets, said Lisa Derderian, a city spokesperson.

"Ultimately," said Augustin, the Pasadena fire chief, "in a unified command, we're collectively doing two things: You're looking out for the best interest of your city, but also you're collectively managing a large-scale incident — doing the most amount of good for everyone in need." When his city had additional resources available, he said, emergency staff looked to do things like additional door-to-door notifications or added patrols, which focused on his city but also expanded into Altadena when needed: "We knew no borders."

The county used its WEA system and Alert L.A. County messaging program as the "primary communication methods" to issue urgent

and timely evacuation alerts during the L.A. firestorm, according to a statement from the county's Coordinated Joint Information Center.

The CJIC provides public information during large-scale disasters through the county's Office of Emergency Management.

County officials, however, also recommend people sign up for their more-local emergency notification systems, most operated by cities.

Sheriff's deputies also worked to carry out evacuation orders on the ground, though many in west Altadena said they saw few to no first responders that night.

The CJIC declined to answer specific questions related to the Eaton fire until the after-action report is completed. But it did say it follows all state emergency management requirements and has eight different disaster management coordinators assigned to different regions to better tailor its response. In a statement, it called its emergency response a "collective effort more than that of any single organization, department, or jurisdiction."

It is important to note, however, that the community of Kinneloa Mesa — just east of Altadena — is similarly unincorporated, but had no reported issues with its evacuation alerts. The foothill community sits not far from where the Eaton fire broke out, and its evacuations were swift, with several of the first fire crews arriving there.

And for some, the evacuation-alert issue in west Altadena is just that: one glaring issue, not a reason to go through the complicated and often expensive process of incorporation or deal with more red tape or regulation.

"Obviously something went wrong," said Connor Cipolla, another member of the Altadena Town Council. And while he emphasized that he wants answers and fixes so it doesn't happen again, he said he's not convinced Altadena would get better services as a city, and pointed to California's strong mutual aid system during fires.

"Altadenans love their autonomy," said Cipolla, who remembers living in Pasadena and constantly getting parking tickets. "The quirkiness and the self-determination and not being overregulated — all those things are the free spirit of what it means to be an Altadenan."

Milissa Marona, another Altadena Town Council member, said she partially agrees with Cipolla — and with Greene, who pointed out that Altadena may be getting a bad deal as it remains unincorporated.

Part of what makes Altadena unique is its lack of local, complicated government, she said, but she also realized — especially after the delayed evacuation alerts during the fire — that it can be a weak spot.

"It does somewhat leave a vulnerability there because we don't have the city resources," Marona said, "but I think the county did the best they could."

Times staff writer Terry Castleman contributed to this report.

erosion. Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass held a news conference Thursday to mark 100 days since the fires and tout the speed of the recovery.

"The Army Corps of Engineers are heroes in Los Angeles, are heroes in the states," said Bass, standing alongside Army commander Traci Parsons and Westside councilmember Traci Parsons. "It's amazing to come here after day. ... Every day, I see more and more properties cleared."

The Army Corps of Engineers is the biggest the has ever conducted a fire zone. With a million tons of steel, earth and ready removed burn areas, two overseeing the reached for super describe the work.

The weight removed equal Eiffel towers, said Avichal, the graduate over Altadena fire weight taken sades alone row of Ford lined up stretching from past Salt Lake Brian Sawse Point grad seen the Pa up.

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